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## **Disentangling the meanings of development**

Juhani Koponen

**Abstract:** Development is a powerful but hopelessly slippery and evasive concept, yet scholars keep on defining and redefining it. Lately, it has been suggested that it is not possible to grapple with all the meanings of development and it is better to be understood as a temporary ‘assemblage’. This article takes issue with this suggestion. It argues that development is a historically evolved concept which has acquired many meanings in the course of its own development. Ambiguity and polyvalence are its integral features: without them it could not work as a concept. Yet it has meanings – even a core meaning. Concepts are words and the meanings of words are in the ways they are used. In practice, development is understood simultaneously as (1) a goal; (2) a process leading to that goal; and (3) an intervention triggering such a process. This composite meaning has been there since colonialism and seems to carry on despite all the announcements of its death. With it development continues to retain much of its evocative power. As long as this is the case we need development studies to sort out its intricacies.

**Keywords:** development, post-development, development studies, conceptual history

I tell our first-year students in their second lecture that if there is one question that will return to haunt them it is, ‘What is development?’ Sometimes I wish I were wrong with this prediction but, at least as far as I am concerned, unfortunately I am not. Yes, development is a powerful but hopelessly slippery and evasive concept that defies definition, yet again and again I return to it – even when I no longer have a professional obligation to do so. I am struck by the great variety of ways the notion of development can be and is used. It is employed both as descriptive and normative concept. It can empirically refer to something which has happened or is happening or it can evoke an idea or ideal of what should happen. Likewise, development can denote both the end of a process, taken either empirically or normatively, or the process itself, or the means to achieve that end or goal. It can mean either an immanent, endogenously unfolding process or something emanating from conscious, intentional intervention, and – most importantly - this very intervention. In all these respects, development can refer to an almost infinite variety of different things, from economic growth through increased productivity and production of more or less necessary gadgets to the fundamental values of good life and enlargement of human freedom. I cannot get rid of the will to make sense of all this despite the time and effort involved.

In our discussions extending over almost four decades I have understood that Jeremy Gould shares the ambition to understand what development is about although our approaches are rather different. Such differences are to be welcomed in a Habermasian spirit: although we

may never arrive at ideal speech situations we always have to strive for them. Continuing our fragmented and intermittent dialogue I would like to take issue with his suggestion to the effect that it is not possible to grapple with all the meanings of development and that it is better understood as an ‘assemblage’ (Gould 2007). He made this suggestion a few years ago in similar circumstances as I am doing now but I gather it is still valid to him. He then expressed his dissatisfaction with the habit of defining development as what he calls an epiphenomenon: that is, seeing (“construing”) it as a property of a society as a whole, or as a process by which a society or some of its essential aspects change from one condition to another. Gould admits that this is laudably holistic, but complains that it leads to a “fundamental epistemological problem”. In order to speak of society we must simplify. Attempts at simplification engender other similar attempts. Thus we end up with competing simplicities, meaning more complexity. In other words, however hard we try to simplify development, it will remain “foundationally” complex. (Gould 2007: 271-73.)

The solution suggested by Gould is radically to do away with the epiphenomenal view of development: to see development not as a qualitative property of a society, but as the product of specific, delimited practices: as a “‘machinic’ configuration of bodies and ideas, agency and enunciations”, or as a “socio-epistemic assemblage” (Gould 2007: 277, 281) Then it is the task of development studies, or ‘post-development studies’ to him, to ‘disassemble’ such postcolonial assemblages: to map the mechanisms of assemblage and ‘the entanglements’ of ‘development’. This is a task of ‘epistemic decolonization’: to reveal the mechanisms, dispositions and interests through which ‘development’ legitimizes postcolonial asymmetries of power and privilege. (Gould 2012.)

This is an ingenious attempt for which much could be said: surely it is possible to see development as such an assemblage of a ‘socio-epistemic’ nature. But I detect two problems here. This is only one way of seeing development, which takes one partial use and elevates it to the paramount one, thereby neglecting the historically accumulated richness of its meanings. Moreover, I am not convinced of the value of the conceptual label of assemblage, in spite of its increasing popularity among constructivist-minded social scholars. The bottom line must be that development is a *concept*, a notion, and concepts by definition refer to a great variety of things. We cannot overcome the necessity to speak of complex realities with simplifying concepts by throwing the concepts overboard. Concepts are bound to simplify because they abstract from empirics. I believe that we as social researchers have no way of

creating a language of our own; rather, we must use the same words as everyone else and we have little power to adjudicate their uses by others. When something is referred to as development it is *conceptualized* as such, and once this happens, the concept attaches to its referent and starts working on it, accumulating historical baggage. This is a far cry from any 'epiphenomenalisation' – at least if we operate with the dictionary definition which says that epiphenomenon means a secondary effect or by-product which arises from but does not causally influence a process.

### *Assemblage – modernist sensibility or lost in translation?*

Although the term assemblage has, during the last decade, gained currency in English-language cultural studies, anthropology and human geography, its uses remain imprecise and suggestive. It has several origins and meanings but its common elements are usually taken to include an emphasis on qualities such as emergence, agency, contingency and ephemerality. It has been called an “anti-structural concept that enables the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentered and ephemeral in nonetheless ordered social life” and in this way display “modernist sensibility” (Marcus and Saka 2006: 101). It is sometimes connected with aesthetic concepts such as collage and sometimes with *dispositif* (apparatus) and others in the Foucauldian schema, situated somewhere in between. Its main inspiration comes from the relational social ontology of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who attempted to fuse psychoanalysis with some major Marxist ideas, seeing desire as the main force moving through human relations and assembling them into emergent wholes. A somewhat more pragmatic version has been developed in the actor-network theory (ANT), most famously represented by Bruno Latour. While assemblage of the Deleuze-Guattari derivation is an integral part of the larger philosophical schema and gains its sense only in relation to other concepts in it, the ANT version simply looks for empirically observable combinations of related dimensions (Palmås 2007).

To add to the confusion there is the fact that while much of the inspiration comes from the French discourse the main use of the concept of assemblage is in English-speaking academia, not least in North America, and something may have got lost in translation. The problem is not as serious as it was with the Foucauldian conceptual schema where the readers of the English translations for years failed to realize the emergence of the pivotal concept of *dispositif* to denote the whole combining of discursive and material in Foucault's texts from

the 1970s onwards; confusingly, in different texts it was translated in many different ways as apparatus, arrangements, and so forth (see Peltonen 2008). Concerning assemblage, the source of confusion is more semantic. The original word used in French is *agencement* for which assemblage is considered a somewhat restricted and problematic translation. The word *assemblage* is known also in the French language but its meaning arguably is more restricted (Phillips 2006).

Given such complexity, it is no wonder that the reader has at first to struggle with Gould's construction of development as assemblage. We are told it has two 'axes': the horizontal ('territorialization') and the vertical ('deterritorialization'), which are in constant conflict; the 'territorial stability' of the assemblage being constantly challenged by deterritorializing practices and artefacts through which heterogeneity reasserts itself. This becomes clearer when the framework is imposed on what Gould calls the development industry. The notions start to become more familiar and communicate with the stranger ones. We are asked to "map the conditions for the possibility of development's quasi-hegemonic assemblage" by "extending energies ... called 'development agency'" – a "normative-instrumental project". I think this is what we usually call postcolonial development efforts or interventions, embodied in development agencies, which are sourced from funds earmarked for development, and staffed by employees with professionalized or semi-professionalized skills. Gould is particularly interested in the knowledge practices of development agency, especially what he calls the "algorithms of selectivity and translation" by which representations of reality in recipient countries (data) are selectively appropriated as facts (evidence) and further translated into guidelines for action (policy). Such knowledge practices cannot be seen as separate from the everyday flow of events but are intrinsic to them.

I believe assemblage refers here to what I have referred to as a developmentalist complex. These two are far from being the only contending conceptualizations. Other candidates include 'developmentalist configuration' (Olivier de Sardan 2005); 'Development' with capital D (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin 2008); 'aid system' (Tvedt 2006); or aid regime (used in international relations literature). Basically, all these have the same empirically observable object: the whole complex of on-going development discourses and practices with their constituent institutions and organizations and resources. Assemblage may look more sophisticated by being better specified by its internal structure and dynamics but I think in giving privilege to emergence and contingency it overlooks the historicity of the strong and

complex structural forces underpinning it. And while it is clear that within the assemblage/complex/configuration there are many kind of forces at work, both homogenizing and heterogenizing, or stabilizing and destabilizing, at least in Gould's rendition it is difficult to see what is gained by introducing the topographic metaphor of axes and naming them 'territorialization' and 'deterritorialization'. We are told that territorializing forces producing a modicum of stability include opaqueness (inaccessibility to public scrutiny), order (bureaucracy), and objectification (bureaucratic practices, and the Foucauldian "discursive regularities" of development language such as consensualism, and desemantisation). Yet, by definition, each of these must have their destabilizing ("deterritorializing") counterforces, which are to be found in the rhetoric of accountability, ownership and participation, and so forth (Gould 2007: 285-290). For me, it seems that whereas the 'territorializing' forces belong to the common if somewhat outdated bureaucratic arsenal, the continuous co-optation of the heterogeneous elements only reinforces the stability of the complex.

As far as I understand, for Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 22), more or less everything is assemblage ("all we know are assemblages"). To really judge the usability of their notion for development studies would then require an assessment of the usability of their philosophy as a whole, or at least its crucial social ontology, a project that I am not going to attempt. As is evident from the above, I am not happy with the present use of the notion of assemblage in any of its senses and if no better grounds are presented I doubt the benefits of extending it to development. So let us leave the a-word now and proceed to another of Gould's (2007: 293) considerable substantive claims:

[T]o grasp the effects of development one must look beyond the projects done in its name and the rationalizations espoused for its essence, to the knowledge practices through which these projects and claims come to appear natural and compelling to the development agents who carry out the work as well as to the taxpayers who foot the bill.

I think this is a worthy task which I support and with which I largely agree although as I see it we need to go even beyond the knowledge practices and see not only how the projects but the whole development exercise comes to appear natural and compelling to those engaged in it. And here I think we have reached the limits of regarding development as a combination of discourse and practice, complex or assemblage or however we prefer to conceptualize it. We

must turn into the broader concept of development: what are the elements that make us see it in such a desirable light that we are driven to do things in its name?

*Meanings of development: many and one*

My argument has for some time been, and remains, that much of the power of development resides in the very word and the multiple meanings that it carries which make it a concept. One way of putting it would be to go with (the late) Wittgenstein (1995 [1953]) and recognize that words like development provide us a 'picture' that guide and condition our thinking and actions. That is, 'development' can be thought of as a mental image couched in a linguistic form which is so powerful that it does not easily allow us to discursively assess its strengths and weaknesses; which has such an evocative power that it takes us captive. In order not to be overwhelmed by this power we have to keep alert and fight against this picture-forming power, and for this purpose we need some painstaking conceptual and historical analysis.

If this is so, there is no need to worry about the many definitions of development. Rather, ambiguity and polyvalence are integral features of the concept itself: there cannot be a correct definition of development. This is partly because of its normative nature but, above all, because it has a history. It is increasingly realised that far from being a post-1940s 'invention', as claimed by, for example, Sachs and his collaborators in their hugely influential but flawed critique of development (1992), the notion has been around in European discourse since at least from the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and in some senses even longer. And it is this history that has made it a concept by letting it accumulate various overlapping meanings. As Koselleck, the doyen of the German *Begriffsgeschichte*, puts it: concepts are the concentrate of several substantial meanings and "a concept must remain ambiguous in order to be a concept" (Koselleck 1985: 84). Rather, the very power of development stems from its historically acquired ambiguity and polyvalence: while everybody can agree on its significance, there can be no agreement on what it actually is and thus many things can be accommodated under its umbrella. That is why development has been found able to "seduce, in every sense of the term: to charm, to please, to fascinate ... but also to abuse, to deceive..." (Rist 2002: 1). To understand the sources of its power, the first thing we need to undertake is a concept-historical analysis of how its meanings have been accumulated, intertwined and blended.

But we must not stop there. Although there cannot be a correct definition of the *concept* of development, it does not follow that the *word* development has no meanings and those meanings cannot be captured. Concepts are words and words do have meanings. Here, too, the cue is taken from Wittgenstein: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein 1995 [1953]: 20). If we look at the actual use of the word development in our discourse at present, it is easy to recognize that it has three basic senses: (1) that of a goal or an ideal; (2) of a process of change; and (3) of an active intervention. This observation is commonplace; I stress that the three senses form a unity which encompasses all of them and transcends their individual meanings. These three basic senses were noted in Arndt’s (1981) article but lost in his subsequent work (1987). Cowen and Shenton (1996) emphasize the distinction between ‘immanent’ and ‘intentional’ development but play down the role of the ideal. Thus, in practice development is understood as action on the belief that an intervention will trigger such a process that will lead to what we ideally regard as development; and it is also taken as the process and the intervention itself. This composite meaning is the one which is, explicitly or implicitly, used in most of the existing histories of development, like that of Cowen and Shenton (1996) who saw development being used as a ‘doctrine’ in 19<sup>th</sup>-century European social policy to restore social order shaken by industrial progress and the rise of surplus population; or my own, focusing on its use in overseas colonial policy in Africa, first as ‘development for exploitation’, seeing development as an unacknowledged condition of colonial exploitation (Koponen 1994; 1997), and its subsequent extension to include ‘welfare’ in order to increase its power for political legitimization (Koponen 2014).

Throughout its history, development has been an extraordinarily transforming and changeable concept yet it has been firmly grounded. As put by a major German historian of concepts: “The history of the word ‘development’ is characterized by the fact that it has always added on new meanings; still the older meanings do not disappear but remain in use. Here lies one of the grounds for the polyvalence and ambiguity of the present notion of development.” (Wieland 1975: 199). But what we can learn from Foucault is that conceptual archaeology needs to be complemented by genealogy. While it is necessary to examine the emergence of knowledges and discourses ‘archaeologically’, defining their locations in successive discursive formations or regimes of truth, the same also needs to be done ‘genealogically’, examining their emergence and descent, without resorting to a transcendental subject going beyond the immediate actors.



An operation of the latter type will reveal that during the course of its emergence, development, as we now understand it, has gained a core meaning. Indeed, without such a core development could not possess its picture-forming power and could not function in the way that it does. The multitude of senses in which development is used should not confuse us into thinking that its definition is a matter of taste. But to define that meaning is not to pick up one of the current or past or visionary usages of the concept of development and raise it above the rest as being truer, more authentic or in any other way superior. Neither is an endeavour called for to penetrate beyond the surface of current meanings to find the 'essence' of development. The whole thing is much simpler. As Wittgenstein (1995[1953]) noted, the meaning of a word is in its use. Development is a polyvalent, constantly changing multiple-use word for a concept, which has no hidden essence. It means what its users take it to mean. Its power is derived from the same source.

There is still much that we do not properly understand here and that requires further study. One task is to trace the trajectory of the ascendancy of the activist imperative of development and to find out how development became a foundational concept in the 1940s, shaping a whole discourse and grounding an international order. Although the everyday practice of colonialism involved much of what we nowadays call development, and the notion of development was also a part of colonial vocabulary – in the British case most famously in Lord Lugard's (1955[1922]) 'dual mandate' – under colonialism development remained one notion among many similar, such as civilization, improvement, and betterment. Was it only in the famous Point Four in the inaugural speech of the US President Harry Truman in January 1949 that development acquired the moral high ground which made its new function possible? Truman not only defined the developers and the ones to be developed; he de-linked development from colonial exploitation and made it a common good that everybody was obliged to promote. Then was it possible to deploy it in the reorganization of the relations between richer and poorer countries as the latter were being freed from colonial rule.

Another important step was that African and Asian nationalist leaders and people alike took development as their own. Truman's vision served US foreign policy interests but it also chimed with aspirations held widely in the emerging Third World. Unless we wish to open the gate for explanations assuming the operation of a 'false consciousness', we have to acknowledge that these reflected widely felt needs and interests, both material and mental.

The Afro-Asian nationalists turned the tables on colonialism and accused colonialists of too little development. But we must be aware of another translation trap here. The notion of development in European languages appears remarkably similar regardless of semantic differences: it is structured similarly in all major languages and language groups. But when we go to non-European languages, the situation changes. At least in those two languages of which I know a little, Kiswahili and Nepali, the connotations of active involvement and intervention are largely lacking. The Kiswahili *maendeleo* and the Nepali *bikas* translate more into progress and modernity: development there is not something that is done but something that is brought in. This proposition also requires further research but I would suggest that this may be a major factor affecting the difference of how development is seen in the North and the South.

To prevent the most elementary misunderstandings, I should state explicitly that I am not claiming that there are no other meanings to development outside that core one I have sketched. Of course there are, and many. 'Development' has retained much of its original sense of unrolling or unfolding something rolled or folded up, and, by metonymous extension, bringing out something which already exists in a germ. This is so in particular in some technical usages, the best known of which probably is that related to pre-digital photography. But even these meanings are not innocent or irrelevant to what I have called the core meaning of development. They all belong to the same family; indeed, they reinforce and define each other in several ways. The original meanings still underline and colour the rest: the idea of development as a process taking place in time in a spatially unequal manner, which emerged in Europe during the critical historical juncture at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; development as socioeconomic intervention which in the colonial context manifested itself as development of resources; and development as a common good to be used as the basis for global intervention that was Truman's contribution. Whether as an ideal, as process or as intentional intervention, development deals with something which is thought to be developable from its more elementary present form into a fuller future form. The end result is immanent in the beginning, something which also justifies and necessitates its development.

*From Development to Developmentalism*

Truman's speech was also a major benchmark in the process whereby development became a foundation of what I have called developmentalism: an ideology underpinning the new world order and a praxis drawing on the notion of development and feeding on resources provided by it, basically the funds of Official Development Assistance. Two points need to be made here. First, developmentalism is based on the core belief and promise of the modern notion of development: that a well-meaning, rationalistically constructed intervention in a social process will lead to such development that we regard good and desirable, and that it is in the long-term interest of everybody to foster such interventions. The material resources available for developmentalism, basically the ODA funds, are crucially dependent on this assumption. Second, what is ideally meant as development is of secondary importance. The views on it have changed and keep on changing; they will depend on the prevailing interpretation. From economic growth and modernisation we have come to poverty alleviation and good governance, and local ownership and partnership, and returned to 'pro-poor' economic growth. Tomorrow no doubt something new will be introduced. What remains is more structural: the conviction of the goodness and desirability of 'development' and the concomitant, common moral imperative to foster it.

That conviction I think is ideological and that imperative is moral, and this is precisely where the use value of the notion of developmentalism lies. Ideology, to be sure, is not a very fashionable notion any longer but I think it is still serviceable if we employ it in the sense of a guide for action combining factual knowledge claims with value-based assessments. Much of the ideological attraction of developmentalism is derived from its implicit moral superiority: development is seen as a common good, which is of benefit for all but for the achievement of which everyone has to offer something. Doing development is doing good. This immediately raises the questions: which good and good for whom? My suggestion would be that developmentalism is far from a disinterested or 'altruistic' attitude: it is just a different way for a state, or another actor, to conceive and promote its own interests in a given international constellation. It emerged in the postcolonial situation when it became necessary to reshuffle the political and ideological underpinnings of the world order. Development was already there: used to organize and justify the colonial exploitation. It is easy to expand from that to the claim that the aim of postcolonial developmentalism has been to pursue more egoistic state interests. It not only provides a great deal of the conceptual underpinnings for international interaction but also offers the justification for much transnational intervention.

Now if we put Gould's "algorithms of selectivity and translation" and other knowledge practices into this context we see better what is at stake. So far so much emphasis in research on developmentalist efforts has been on the inputs: funds, resources and policies. Recently, further attention has shifted to effect, and lately to even larger impacts. Information or knowledge is everywhere, but it has been more taken for granted rather than subjected to critical scrutiny. Even a superficial acquaintance with the workings of the developmentalist complex, or assemblage, or whatever one wants to call it, reveals that information plays a key role. Whether aid is conceived as a system or a chain, we see within it funds going one way (down) and information coming the other way (up). The growing rhetoric of 'results-based aid' can hardly conceal the simple fact that resources are exchanged less for tangible results and more for information about such results. Thus Gould's emphasis on actual knowledge practices and their naturalizing effects is highly welcome. What makes the 'regimes of truth' especially pernicious in development is that the actual realities are so distant and physically inaccessible to most of the participants that the information which reaches them has gone through many channels and gates and been moulded by powerful mechanisms of selection and translation (whether 'algorithms' or not). But I believe that the examination of such practices is better informed by other notions, such as developmentalism, grounded in history, than positing a machinic assemblage with its mysterious axes and territories.

### *Keeping development, rejuvenating development studies*

So, what are the implications of all this to development studies? In his 2012 representation Gould sketched a programme for 'post-development studies', consisting of 'critique' in two senses: (1) related to scientific standards, that is, those by which knowledge can with certainty be distinguished from pseudo-knowledge (i.e. Kantian critique); and (2) related to extra-scientific norms, meaning that the question becomes one of the dispositions, interests or outcomes a text promotes or represents and by what norms they should be assessed. The task he put forward, referring to Latour (1995), was to tackle "matters of concern" and no longer debunk but to protect and to care. This would amount to no less than a creation of a new "ethos of difference and respect, with alternative ontologies, relationality and entitlement of voice; or an ethos of planetary care - 'care-full' critique.

How does this compare with what old-fashioned 'straight' development studies are trying to do? There, the starting point is not called 'matters of concern' but referred to more

mundanely as 'development problems'. Research is expected to directly tackle these: to produce and disseminate knowledge that helps us understand and explain the causes of these problems and in this way contribute towards their solution. But it is also emphasized that development studies has a critical function in tracing what actually is undertaken and happens under the banner of development. It is hammered home to students that development studies belongs to academia and is committed to following academic ideals and standards in its work of producing and disseminating knowledge, practical and critical alike. Gould's version looks different as it is put in different language and carefully eschews the use of the notion of development, but the basic ingredients are much the same. To protect and care for matters of concern – what else is this if not continued intervention for worthy tasks?

I am afraid that it is far too early to anticipate the death of development: across the globe, it continues to retain much of its evocative power. As long as this is the case we need development discourse and development studies to sort out its intricacies. Post-development cannot do this and that is why we must resist its seductions. Development works as a complex of ideas and practice; but it gets its fuel for its meanings from outside that complex. Whatever problems might be inherent in development, they are not the fault of the concept *per se* but rather the underlying beliefs embedded deeply in our culture and mentality that the concept has during its own development appropriated: such as a belief in the possibility of planning progress and the will to intervention. Throwing the concept and its critique overboard will not do away with such beliefs but will deprive us of a potential means to tackle them.

This is not to say that development and development studies are not in need of rejuvenation. I see at least two urgent tasks. First, the old agenda of 'ideological developmentalism' needs to be replaced by what might be called 'methodological developmentalism'. Here I am inspired by Olivier de Sardan's (2005) distinction between ideological and methodological populism, although the context is rather different. That is, the basic developmentalist belief that a well-meaning and rationally planned intervention will lead to a what we ideally regard as development is to be challenged and, instead, focus should be shifted to methodological examination of how the developmentalist complex and the world around it are actually working. And we need to rethink what we mean by 'social' when we innocently say that development studies is a social science discipline. It is time to give serious attention to the voices that challenge the traditional Durkheimian way of explaining the social by social (it is

here that we need Latour 2005) and to understand that what we traditionally call geographical, natural or biological are as much part of social processes as what we call political, economic or cultural.

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